

CANBERRA'S AFTERLIFE HIGH PRESSURE CRYSTALS AND THE BUSH CAPITAL DREAM

BY ANGEL BORREGO CUBERO

TRANSFORMATION

Division

Canberra, the “Bush Capital” of Australia, was always a project divided between ambition and avoidance. While the planning process, which included an international competition for the design of the new city, showed an optimistic belief in the power of architecture to shape its future, the decision about its location was driven by political fear. The endless quarrel between Sydney or Melbourne for the capital seat meant that the final decision avoided larger territorial aspirations.

Other “new capital-city” projects have traditionally tried to make sense of their national geography and regional ambitions. This approach was demonstrated by Brasilia only a few decades later, which tried to radically integrate the Amazonia in the decision making process for the future of the country.

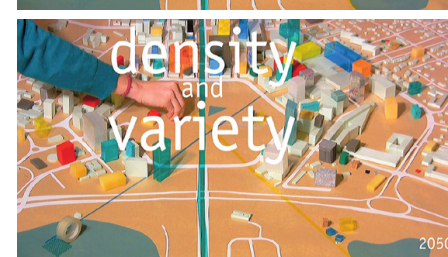
The Australian Government faced two interesting architectural and political options: it could choose an already thriving city as their seat; or it could try a more ambitious move and find a suitable location to symbolically and strategically structure the vast expanse and culture of the new country. It chose neither.

Instead, Australian petty politics of the time decided on a shy and fearful plan: the capital would go to a barely inhabited area midway between its already two most important cities, which had been endlessly quarreling for the honor.

In spite of the questionable location choice, the ensuing process showed drive and ambition in its belief in the power of architecture to shape its future. The crystalline structure of the winning Griffin scheme was bold and contained the promise of enlightened irradiation.

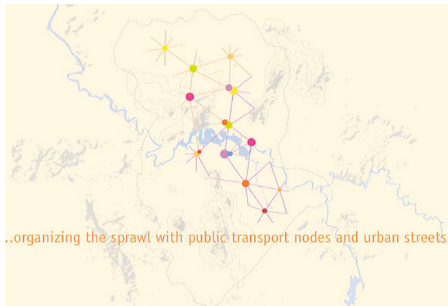
Drive

A descendant of the “City Beautiful” movement and plans like Burnham’s for Chicago or Ebenezer Howard “Garden Cities”, the winning design Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin proposed for Canberra relied on a series of well defined, thematic centers, or *nuclei*. In an

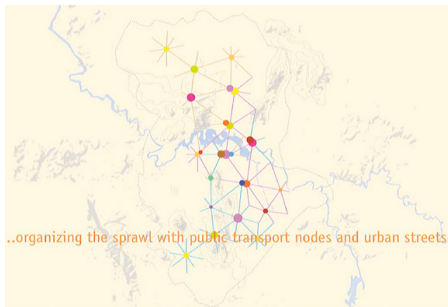




Imagine we take the original Griffin plan and we copy and paste it..



..organizing the sprawl with public transport nodes and urban streets



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interesting adaptation, these were joined together in a not perfectly regular structure, a quasi-crystalline plan that they tried to integrate in the surrounding landscape. Its structure promised an interesting balance between density and dispersion, between artificial form and nature inclusion. But, like some of its overly simplistic American and European models, it lacked the ability to integrate different cultures within: an condition that, on the contrary, a city ought to be based on.

Canberra's idealistic project started slow but it managed to run into administrative trouble and "quabble" early on, when fear and abandonment struck again, in force. Postwar Canberra, like so many other cities at the time, let its future be redesigned by bureaucratic battles and Cold-War traffic engineers, converting the dream of a modern Babylon into sprawl and highways.

Refuse

In spite of its formally ambitious planning, Canberra ended up having the same suburban afterlife as its American originals: one dominated by lazy suburbanizing processes, led by administrative ease of use, a city, or rather a "metropolitan area" of standardized planning practices and imported mobility concepts and objects that would come to dominate it completely.

After only a few years the Griffin plan became a urban left over. Growth happened as if it were any other suburban development, a bland mix of highways, parking lots and isolated and single family homes with no relationship to the existing landscape or the original structure of the city.

Reuse

But Canberra's mix of ambition and banality is, perhaps, what a good city is all about, the basic foundation for a thriving metropolis. A capital city needs, on one hand, a healthy amount of desire, it must sustain a drive for the symbolic, but, on the other, its structure will want normalcy, uniformity, regularity, sameness.

Although an unmitigated failure at the moment, could we still reuse these two systems or concepts and integrate them into a new model for

the future transformation of cities?

In an era of diminishing resources Canberra's mix of structure and formlessness may be an asset we can (and should) reuse, one that we can use again: literally, build on.

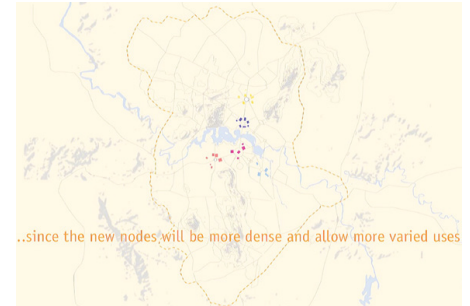
Product

Canberra does not need a new idea. It does not need, either, any more land or to extend itself endlessly into "The Bush". What Canberra needs is just more of itself, albeit in different proportions and different amounts.

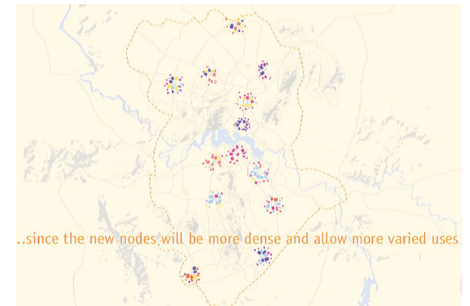
We can easily imagine the multiplying the original Griffin plan, as if we could repeatedly, and in different positions, add the city to itself, organizing the sprawl with new nodes, and public transport with more densely "urban" streets between them. The "new" nodes will be allowed to grow within themselves, establishing game rules consistent with the original plan and the necessary evolution at each historical moment, as more important than frozen architectural form. These nodes will also allow for a much greater variety in their programmatic design, avoiding and correcting what we know now to be the grave mistake of strict zoning, so typical of the moment.

Making use of the strangely contemporary quasi-crystalline structure of the Griffin city plan, we can copy and paste this urban structure, moving and rotating it as it slowly adapts to the existing sprawl, densifying convenient parts of it, helping structure new and sustainable transportation routes and systems. Other areas, will be left untouched, as low-density as they are today, where it is convenient, intensifying the different qualities as they evolve and become more desirable.

A similar multiplication process applies to the different nuclei of Canberra. Each "new" node would be the result of adding different original thematic nodes, one on top of the previous one. Instead of enlarging, for instance, the "Government" or "Civic Center", "adding", as it were, these nodes on top of themselves, we would displace and rotate them, so that they would be the



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Previous pages:
We can easily imagine the multiplying of the original Griffin plan, as if we could repeatedly, and in different positions, add the city to itself. Stills from the video "CAPITHEICAL" by OSS/ Angel Borrego Cubero. The video can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/45799435>

Top and facing page:
What Canberra needs is just more of itself, albeit in different proportions and different amounts

All images © Angel Borrego Cubero

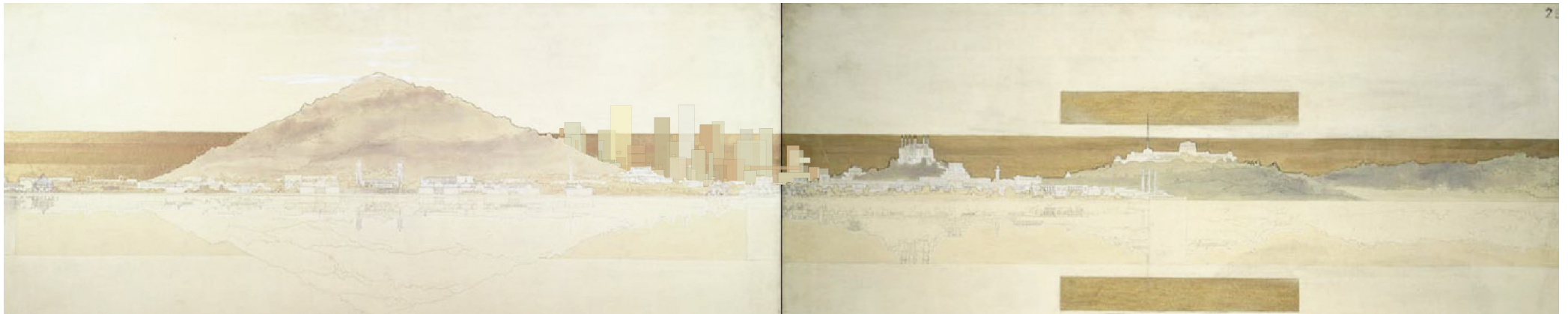
product of slightly different structures and programs. Each new node would be more inclusive, a larger, denser and more diverse area, a micro-city in itself that would become the inner growth reservoir for city growth.

With this reclaimed space for higher density, Canberra can then grow from the inside instead of sprawling away, lowering its expenditure on transport and its carbon and sustainability footprint.

Still, in the theoretical product of copying and pasting, the less dense areas will naturally remain so, its predominant way of life unchallenged, but contained.

Minor, but detailed changes in street and public space design will allow for easier multi-species (people, animals...) access to urban and natural resources. Canberra could become a new paradigm for more intense urban life, at the same time a stronger artificial structure and more inclusive of soft natural and cultural systems within itself.

*Bottom:
With higher density, Canberra can then grow from the inside instead of sprawling away, lowering its expenditure on transport and its carbon and sustainability footprints*



Angel Borrego Cubero holds a PhD in Architecture (UPM-ETSA Madrid) and a MArch (Princeton). He has taught at Princeton, Pratt, ETSAM. He has been developing an interdisciplinary body of works that deals with issues such as the contemporary urban condition, the negotiations between private and public space.